

PHILIP PARDI
My Father's Christening

1

After the story, its telling, and only then is it a story.

2

Here, danger is all in the tweaked reach
for balance,

schlepping the ladder through snow, questions
where before I had two feet,

even the red dirt, even the muddy brook,
white-faced.

Halfway from porch to dead maple I slip, ladder
akimbo—

so quickly snow finds ankle and wrist, so quickly I'm up
to shake it off.

3

Alexander wasn't content to merely sack Tyre.

Why was he piqued?

Because they had been arrogant?

Because their seamanship spooked him?

Historians disagree.

For seven months, soldiers worked to construct a bridge
that might carry the Macedonian soldiers from the mainland
to the walls of the offshore city.

The bridge, or mole, or dam, or causeway,
is there to this day in what is now Lebanon.

From inside Tyre, the Phoenicians rained down arrows,
launched burning rafts.

Historians agree that Alexander was usually humane toward his prisoners.

On this occasion, however, he decided the point was the story.

Eight thousand Phoenicians fell.

Along the coast of the island, Alexander had his men erect
two thousand crosses. These were for the young men.

Over thirty thousand women and children were sold into slavery.

Essentially, that was the end of the Phoenicians.

4

I once went to see a fight between
two men, one was a friend, so strong,
smiling all the while with us, his buddies
who'd come for the show. They met, these two,

behind the pharmacy, and those who came
to watch sat on the stoop. Nothing
turns as quickly as the tide against you.
The other guy, smaller than me,

was all fury. One flurry, just one, and
my friend looked up at us with buttery
unresolve. We who weren't fighters, what
could we do but watch, and when he ran,

run with him?

5

They came, they came with baskets, they came to watch
(a man is speaking), ladies and children all
came dressed in their Sunday best, intent on a picnic.
They'd watch the war begin and end right here:

Manassas, or Bull Run, the troops and families
marching out together, wetting their shoes
with dew, blankets and picnics unfurled on the hillside.
And congressmen in buggies were there too;

there was to be a victory party that night
in Fairfax, there was whiskey, there was champagne.
But then, can you imagine thousands running,
troops and mothers, uncles and children, the food

trampled, a fear among them, not then knowing
Beauregard wouldn't sack the city. How certain
they were, how little they knew, walking into
the fields the way that we might go to a ballgame—

6

Here the man pauses, looks up from his cannoli. Glancing around, he realizes everyone has drifted away, his story unheard, unheeded. He stands alone at the buffet. At the far end of the rented hall, he might see my grandmother, young then, cradling her firstborn, my father, age two months, all the more tightly in light of the radio playing. December 1941, and we can imagine a leanness to the leaves that have waited this long to fall, and the quiet outside, and the quiet inside, but for the radio. They'd been in the car, driving over from the church of St. Francis, when the radio broke in with news that fixes forever a place. From a rooftop, a reporter said the planes were flying so low he could see the pilots smiling. My grandfather wasn't sure whether to pull over or speed up or start honking his horn. A vast secret to have to bear into the day, to others who maybe haven't heard, or maybe they have, and when they try to tell you, you must quiet them, unable to hear it told in words not yours. The food goes uneaten as a terrible smallness crowds into the hall. The world is elsewhere, but coming.

7

Snow-shinned.

Even on this dying maple, a few leaves survive.

The plan was never not to fall, they say, only to see it through, to see
the burden
unburdened,

but you with the wet socks (I was just turning away) why must you
grasp so wildly
at what you believe? When will you let yourself be

not witness (who must, after all, flee with the tale) but,
like us, wet and chilled?

Going back for the saw, at the spot where before I fell, I step carefully,
fall again.

8

Late night reading
of Aeneas
arriving, seven

years gone and salt-stained: some-
how he survived
and now he must explain

how. Stumbling into Carthage, he finds
all of Troy before him, ablaze,
and Priam speared and ladders rising

about the walls, *a tortoise shell*
of overlapping shields
assailing the gate, and

he himself he sees, mid-wrath—
a mural. Stumbling,
that is, into his own story.

9

Mid-fall, early October, my father's sixteenth birthday, he's on the roof.
New Jersey humming about and beneath him,

the lights far fewer than in the town I will know: it's dark enough
to see

and he sees it now: the slow spin, the dull throb, this man-made
moon

flashing
overhead—

no fear here, no headlines pounding out their capital letters, he can't
imagine the Russians

wanting much to do with Edison, N.J., any more
than he can believe in a God

who'd kill his son, or that Nippy Jones had been hit yesterday
leading off the 10th. Seeing

isn't but half of it, he's sure, shoe polish or no, flashing lights
above or no. No,

Sputnik showers down no revelations
on him, no dreams

of becoming an astronaut or venturing far
from home,

no wish but the wish for utter normalcy: dinner, and after
dinner,

a drink, and how far away even that must seem. Nearby,
a radio plays

Jerry Lee, and my father listens with his back
flat

on the flat roof, his eyes alive
to what he knows

is a spent fuel tank tumbling ahead
of the satellite, though

try as he might, he can't train
his eyes

on a spot just behind it. Knowing
it's there

doesn't help, can't help him
find it.